

*Preaching
Christ
Crucified*

Preaching Christ Crucified

By

Reverend Robert Nash, S.J.

COVER ART: Christ Crucified from BigStock.

Preaching Christ Crucified

INTRODUCTION

MAGDALENE

A YOUNG WOMAN was kneeling in tears, for sin had broken her heart. To be sure, she had no enviable reputation in the happy city where she lived. She had gone on her evil way for years—deafening her ears to the warnings of conscience, laughing with an assumption of gaiety when her friends tried to save her, fondly talking herself into believing she was happy and carefree, that her beauty held many enthralled, and that she had found in the thrill and excitement of her sin all that life held of true enjoyment.

However, a change had come that day. Quite suddenly, it seemed, she decided to call a halt to her reckless chase. Today, compunction seized upon her at last, for she listened to a new Prophet, and never did man speak as He spoke. His words pierced her heart like a two-edged sword and she found her way—indeed, she practically forced her way into the banquet hall where He reclined at table. She knelt very low, even down at His feet, and she sobbed out her story of sin and shame and repentance. And Jesus bent over Magdalene that day and pronounced a sentence upon her that nearly paralyzed her, so overpowering was the ecstasy of joy with which it inundated her soul. “Many sins are forgiven her because she hath loved much.”

It was a moment of extraordinary grace and she knew that never again could she be the same Magdalene. Henceforth, one longing alone would occupy her—to prove to this merciful Christ that her repentance was genuine. She arose to her feet—a woman transformed. On that momentous day, Magdalene took her first step on the road to high sanctity and love beckoned her from one pinnacle to another. Ultimately, it drew her on, that alluring power of a mighty love, even as far as the summits.

SAUL

Saul of Tarsus hated Jesus Christ. In a paroxysm of fury against Him and His followers, Saul rode with an escort of soldiers into Damascus, bearing in his pocket the written authorization to arrest all Christians there, bind them, and bring them to Jerusalem. Suddenly, a light from heaven shone round about him. Terrified, he fell off his horse and, kneeling with joined hands on the dusty roadside, he there received what has often been called “an audacious grace.” The persecutor was changed into an Apostle; the hater of Christ stood up and knew—on that day Christ had sown in his heart the seeds of a love stronger than death.

Henceforth, Christ and His cause became Paul's passion. What a marvelous change! People who listened to him saw that the man was like one beside himself. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . I am sure that neither life nor death . . . nor any other thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord." No power on earth or in hell could hold him now, for he carried in his great heart a furnace of love for Jesus Christ.

When Saul surrendered to that mighty grace offered him on the road to Damascus, his life was immediately transformed. He was imprisoned, shipwrecked, scourged, laughed at as a fanatic, but "in all these things we have overcome, for the sake of Him."

IGNATIUS

Time was hanging heavily on the hands of the wounded soldier, and he called for a book to read and to help him while away the weary hours of his convalescence. They could find nothing to give him except a book of the lives of Christ and His Saints. These he looked at with something very like scorn. This was no reading for a soldier! However, for want of better, he began to turn over the pages listlessly. Presently, interest quickened. What a revelation this was! Here was an entire new world the existence of which he had never even suspected. Here were men and women fired with a love and a zeal for Jesus Christ beside which his own ambitions and schemes for greatness cut a very sorry figure indeed. Would it be possible for him, even for the worldly Spanish hildago, to serve the King of Kings and become distinguished in His service? Perhaps he too could become a saint like these other men and women. Why not?

A mighty grace was offered to Ignatius that day and, with a grateful and a generous heart, he stretched out both hands to accept it. The spark of divine love had caught in his soul and soon it became a flame. It is the nature of fire to spread. The love within him could not rest, and he gathered around him a group of disciples into whose hearts he fused that fire with which he himself was aflame. He insisted they go into the four corners of the world with a mighty ideal spurring them on—to set the entire earth ablaze with the love of Jesus Christ. Here was ambition worthy of all that is noblest in man. Here was the marvel that was wrought when a special grace descended into the soul of that wounded soldier and made the love and loveliness of Jesus Christ a reality to him.

SISTER MARGARET MARY

The nun had been in the stillness of her convent chapel for some time. Presently, she opened her eyes and, to her utter amazement, she saw Jesus Christ standing before her in human form. He showed her His Sacred Heart and told her the flames of His love for men were so violent that they could no longer be restrained. Therefore, He had chosen

her, Sister Margaret Mary, knowing that she was, as she declared, “an abyss of ignorance and weakness” for a great mission. He desired to use her as His instrument to enkindle in men’s hearts the fire of His divine love. Would she allow herself to be used thus?

No wonder she was overpowered at the divine condescension. No wonder she nearly died from excess love and gratitude. That she, the most useless and insignificant nun in the convent, should be singled out for a work of such magnitude and grandeur! Then, as soon as she gave her consent, a ray of the fire from Our Lord’s Sacred Heart shot forth and pierced her own heart. Surely she would have died of love had not Christ sustained her. Never again could she think of anything except that Heart of Christ. Never again could she speak of anything, write of anything, take an interest in anything except the all-absorbing truth that Christ’s love for men was beyond the power of words to express and men were indifferent and should be roused to realize the actuality of the love of a God for their souls. For Margaret Mary, too, transformation had begun.

WHAT DO THESE EXAMPLES TELL US?

From all of this, it seems clear that there are moments to which God’s Providence has attached the communication of special graces. You may go along for years in sin, like Magdalene or Saul, or steeped in worldliness like Ignatius Loyola, when suddenly God’s moment arrives to lay siege to your soul.

Maybe you have been trying hard to love Christ and to serve Him well, but one day He visits you with a torrent of graces. At the time, nothing seems clearer to you than that every single obstacle to His complete reign within you must be swept aside.

His love is now understood to be so true and such a living a thing that, by comparison, everything else is so fickle, so weak, so unstable, and so languishing that a craving rises in your heart to open the hearts and the minds of others, blinded as they are, to see and understand even as you yourself see and understand. When you hear His appeal for apostles, it dawns upon you, perhaps by degrees or perhaps all at once, that His appeal is made to you. He wants everybody to help in His work, and everybody includes you! It is a light, a new impetus, and a powerful urge comes to fling your lot absolutely and unreservedly with His. A loving Christ is calling and you want no more. If He invites, you have no desire or wish to ask whither.

If there is one place more than another where it is reasonable to hope for such a transforming grace, that place is the Hill of Calvary. There, Omnipotence taxes its powers in an effort to stun us into a deeper understanding of the truth of God’s love. “Greater love than this no man hath—that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Calvary is like a great reservoir, the capacity of which is infinite, and in it are stored “the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

Let the soul therefore come to Calvary and kneel down there at those bleeding feet. Here is the source of all grace. Here is Christ ready to pour abundantly His treasure into the soul, the only limitation being the soul's power to receive. Saul of Tarsus went forth to preach Christ and Christ crucified. If the world is to be saved today, salvation can come only from the Cross. If grace is to transform individual souls and fill them with an efficacious desire to become saints, that grace will be given only to those who strive sincerely to reproduce in themselves the virtues of a bleeding Christ.

CHRIST'S SEVEN LAST STATEMENTS

Christ spoke on Calvary and His words came charged with special graces. Even to this day, His words from Calvary retain their efficacy, for they are divine. They possess a transforming power and it behooves us to listen, and upon listening to understand, and upon understanding to put in practice what is enjoined upon us. Omnipotence will be enabled to act when it finds us in fit dispositions. Grace will allure the soul and try to win her, but never will grace use force. On Calvary, the persuasive eloquence of divine grace reaches its climax and it finds its expression in the seven last statements of our dying Savior.

FIRST STATEMENT

FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO.

You will never find an instance of harshness in Our Lord's treatment of a repentant sinner. On the sin itself, He was inexorable, but for the sinner who avowed that he was genuinely ashamed of his base conduct and resolved to amend, Jesus Christ always showed all the compassion and understanding of a tender mother.

Nothing is easier than to illustrate this trait of His character. A whole list of His dealings with repentant sinners comes to mind. There was Magdalene, the woman in the city who was a sinner. There was Peter who denied Him, cursing and swearing that he never knew Him, although only a few hours had elapsed since he had vehemently affirmed that he would shed his blood for Christ. There was the woman of Samaria, the woman taken in adultery, there was even Judas, whom, with a tact truly divine, He tried to save almost in spite of himself. There was His mercy towards His corrupt judges. Witness His warning to Caiaphas and His readiness to speak to Pilate and explain to him everything he wanted to know. Then, on Calvary, there is another instance of His same unfailing mercy. He prays, even for His persecutors. They stand around His Cross, jeering Him in His dying hour, pointing at Him fingers of scorn, but for them, too, He will pray. Father, forgive them.

His excuse for them? “They know not what they are doing.” Surely, His mercy and love without precedent should have taught them. Could any man who was man and no more, evince such patience, such thoughtfulness for others, such astonishing readiness to forgive as they had witnessed this day in Jesus of Nazareth? Why, then, did they not know Him? What was holding their eyes?

If friendship with Our Lord, following upon experimental knowledge of Him, is to come into its own and transform the soul, every obstacle must first be removed. The soul has the fearful power of being able to erect walls to oppose the action of divine grace. Sin and selfishness form the bricks, the mortar, and the clay. Only when those walls have collapsed, or at least have begun to totter, will the soul begin to understand, from her own intimate experience, what it is to know Him Who hangs on Calvary.

Sin and selfishness—how they blind the mind and harden the heart against the influence of grace! Look around at those responsible for the death of Christ and see the many manifestations of selfishness that conspired to bring about the tragic ending to His life. In Annas and Caiaphas, selfishness took the form of an insane hatred and jealousy of Christ and the power He held with the people. If He had been allowed to go on like that, He would have won their allegiance, and the Jewish priests and rulers would have been out of the picture. They said, “Do you see that we prevail nothing? Behold, the whole world is gone after Him.” Selfishness in Annas and Caiaphas took the form of an ungovernable jealousy, and they swore to put Him to death.

In Pontius Pilate, selfishness manifested itself under the garb of slavery to the opinion of the world. This unfortunate man knew very well that His Prisoner was innocent. Pilate declared His innocence openly.

Hence, you would say that Pilate’s course should have been clear. If the Man was innocent, He should have been free to go at once. However, would that please the world? Pilate might have angered the Jews. Pilate might have lost the favor of Caesar. At all costs, he had to keep on good terms with those in power. Therefore, he had resort to a series of shameful subterfuges—sending Our Lord to Herod, scourging Him with savage severity, putting him up against Barrabas. All this he did in a vain effort to keep himself on good terms with the world. In Pilate’s case, selfishness was synonymous with worldliness. Herod too was selfish. No more need be said of this dissolute prince than that he was a slave to the unclean sin. Pleasure was Herod’s idol, before which Christ refused to bend. Herod could not argue with Christ. No defense of his life was possible, so he just laughed at Christ as being out-of-date and sent Him away. The atmosphere was uncomfortable with this Man about. Herod’s reeking soul could not endure contact with the immaculate Christ. He did not argue. He did not try to put up a defense (as

Pilate and the others tried to do). He preferred to smile indulgently. The Man was considered a simpleton. Take Him away and let Herod go on with his fun! Impurity was the very enthronement of selfishness in the heart.

Lastly, there is the mob around the dying Christ. They had been goaded to their act of deicide because they had permitted themselves to be duped by blind guides. They refused to stop and think and reason for themselves. They were victims of lying propaganda.

They did “not know,” because they, too, were eaten up with selfishness. “We will not have this Man to rule over us.”

Why? Because their leaders hated Him and they had promised the mob rich rewards if they succeeded in slaying Him. Again, selfishness was responsible. The crowd listened and believed those specious promises. If these were fulfilled, things would go well indeed with the mob. Wherefore let Christ die. Away with Him! Crucify Him!

Jealousy, worldliness, impurity, credulity—four forms of selfishness that condemned Christ to death. Notice the striking contrast in Our Lord. Already we have dwelt upon His mercy and thoughtfulness for others. Even His enemies on Calvary bear unwitting testimony to His unselfishness. “He saved others, Himself He cannot save!”

Therefore, selfishness blinds men’s eyes. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know.” Selfishness is blinding men’s eyes today. First, there is jealousy and hatred. You will never taste and see that the Lord is sweet as long as you harbor in your heart bitterness against your neighbor.

“As long as you did it to one of these, you did it to Me.” You are estranged from another? You say you will not forgive? You will never salute that person again? Granted, you were treated unjustly. Granted, lying tongues defamed you. Granted, perjury wronged you out of your property.

All that was done to Christ and His vengeance was to pray saying, “Father, forgive them.” As long as you cherish feelings of resentment towards anybody, you are separated from Christ. He is in that person you resent—so unjust, so thoughtless, so selfish. “You did it to Me.” Let the streams of His blood flowing from Calvary break down the barrier of jealousy and lack of charity and He will enter deeply into the soul. Then, you will “know” Him—not out of books or sermons, but from your own intimate experience. Selfishness was holding your eyes, but now with forgiveness comes light to see and to know, and to understand a little better, the strength and sincerity of Christ’s love.

Pilate was filled with the spirit of worldliness and there are many Pilates in the world today. What is the rift of pleasure except worship of the world? There is no time for

Christ or deep prayer because there are so many things to do—so many shows or dances or films. Even if serious sin is avoided, how can any sane man expect to know, love, and realize Christ if life is a ceaseless chase after amusement? No one has a word to say against reasonable recreation, but the evidence is abundant that pleasure seeking is fast absorbing the entire life of many of our people. The result is that God and His service are regarded more or less as interference—an inconvenient and irksome duty to be gotten through with the minimum of time and trouble.

Little do they suspect, these votaries of the world, the deep joy they are missing. “They do not know.” They fancy that passionate devotion to Christ must somehow be a burden. “Being good always” must be such a penance! Their happiness and experience come from the world.

If only they would give grace a chance to teach them the trifles with which they are satisfied and the solid peace they are losing!

The beginnings of every science are difficult. You can recall, perhaps, the painful hammering out of scales and exercises on the piano or the labored sentences of your first essays in writing. However, as you grow proficient, ease comes and pleasure, and finally an absorbing interest.

This is exactly the course, too, in the science of knowing and loving Christ. “It is the first step that counts,” the Little Flower has written. To break with the world you love will probably be desperately hard. To deliberately turn your back on an event or cinema, and instead make a Holy Hour, visit a nursing home, or work for souls in your Sodality or Legion is not a bit attractive to your natural taste. Nevertheless, try it. At present selfishness is blinding you. At present selfishness has vitiated your taste. Put in the sword courageously, cut out this cancer of selfishness, and see how you will then come to know Christ. It is the first step that counts.

SECOND STATEMENT

LORD, REMEMBER ME WHEN THOU SHALT COME INTO THY KINGDOM.

Everybody suffers, at least sometimes, from depression. The disease is so universal that definition of it seems superfluous. There are times when everything goes wrong. Normally, you are easy enough to get on with and people have no difficulty in coming to you in the course of business or recreation. However, when you are depressed you are inclined to be snappy and irritable and your friends leave you wondering what has happened. Usually you take a healthy interest in your work and it is a pleasure to you to settle down to a good hard grind. During normal times, you can concentrate but, when this depression settles upon you, it is only with extraordinary effort that you drag yourself

into your shop or sit at your desk. You cannot easily say what you want to do instead, but, if you allowed yourself, you would be peevish and restless. You are in a mood to doubt if anything is worthwhile. Normally you are fond of a game or a hard tramp into the country or you can enjoy an evening with your friends. However, since this feeling of depression has fallen upon you, you want to be left alone and your friends' efforts to arouse your interest possibly only irritate you the more.

A time of depression has great possibilities to make or to mar your spiritual life. Nothing is easier at such a period than to pitch aside all effort, to forget all one's good resolutions, and, like a spoiled child, to pout and stomp one's foot at the world in general. Nothing is easier than flinging yourself recklessly into serious sin at such a time in an attempt to find the satisfaction you are craving. It was all very well in the fervor of your retreat or mission to make grand promises and to resolve to be all that you know a fervent Catholic should be. Now that this disease has come and, it would seem, has come to stay, you are ready to yield one point after another. What is the use? Others all around you are having a good time. They sin freely and seem to enjoy it. Why make yourself an exception?

On the other hand, a period of depression can be a decided lift to higher things in your spiritual life. It teaches you to look below the surface and read life with the eyes of Jesus Christ. This sense of dissatisfaction with everything and everyone, what else is it but a most cogent argument that you are made for something higher than this world? Often, you can give no reason to yourself for your depression. People are kind to you, your work is said to be a success, your health was never better, you hear good news of those who are dear to you. Yet, with it all, there is this unaccountable fit of weariness with life and this constant restlessness and apparent inability to settle down to work or play or prayer. Is there an explanation?

Yes, there is. If there is no infidelity with which you have to reproach yourself, if you have tried all the while to be faithful to your ideals of prayer and generosity in God's service, and if, in spite of this, you are crushed down by this load, it is safe to assure yourself that the load has been measured you. The Lord Who loves you would teach you and convince you that nothing can satisfy your heart except Him alone.

That was the lesson learned by the Prodigal Son. It was only in his hour of depression that he came to know his father. It was not until he had reached the squalor of the pigsty that he realized his mistake. "How many servants in my father's house, and I the son am here famishing with cold and hunger. I will arise and go to my father!" That same depression brought the repentant thief back on Calvary. "Lord, remember me." It was, if you will, a poor compliment to the Lord that the thief called to Him only after he had drunk to the dregs the intoxications of the world and found them unsatisfying. When all else had failed, he turned to Christ. "Lord, remember me." He wearied of all sin could

give him. He learned that sin is misery indeed. Perhaps Christ could satisfy. Perhaps He after all held the secret of happiness. The thief would try, at least. “Lord, remember me.” Everything else has turned to ashes.

We would never dream of treating a human friend like this. Suppose he offers you his friendship and you reject it. Instead, you go your way and find that you now are unwanted by those for whom you rejected him. Years pass by and you have been all the while unresponsive. All the while, you have sought other friendships and have deliberately held yourself aloof from him. Suppose it is only after a life like this, when you are unwanted by others, when all those years you have turned your back on him, suppose it is only when there is nobody else left to fall back upon that you now return to your friend and accept his friendship and his love. If, even now, he will have you, if, even now, he is glad to receive you, you may indeed congratulate yourself on having found a friend whose friendship is almost unique. That is the theme of Francis Thompson’s poem, “The Hound of Heaven.” All those years the soul has fled Christ, and it is only when it has tasted and tried sin that it finally gives Him a chance to pour into it sweetness and the happiness it has sought. “Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee, save Me, save only Me?”

It is here precisely that Our Lord’s love proves itself so immeasurably superior to the love of everybody else. Reject a human friend and normally the friendship is severed forever. You have spurned his offer of love and have gone for years seeking other friendships. You cannot go back to him now—no, not to a merely human friend. Yet, the friendship of Christ is different. He will have you at any price and at any time. Disappointed, you may be depressed with the world and sin. Disillusioned, you may be depressed by its specious promises. You may be weary of the burden of life. That is often Christ’s moment. It was at a moment like this that the thief saw the light. It was on the Cross that he learned to seek Christ. It was when all else had turned to ashes that he understood at last where to seek and to find a friendship that would endure. It was after a life of ingratitude, after a life in which he had sought and tried out every means of finding happiness apart from Christ, and only at the end that Christ came into His own.

The vastly consoling truth is that Christ accepts him, even now. “This day thou shalt be, with Me in Paradise.” That sentence surely filled the repentant thief with joy. However, the joy was scarcely without alloy. The calamity of it was that life was gone and he discovered Christ only at the end!

THIRD STATEMENT

BEHOLD THY MOTHER; BEHOLD THY SON.

The Blessed Trinity conferred a marvelous privilege on Mary of Nazareth when the angel was sent to ask her to consent to be God's Mother. However, it is far from the truth to imagine that the divine maternity implied an honor only. Our Lady knew well that her "fiat" would entail a life of suffering. All through the years after the Incarnation, she was asked to sacrifice. On Calvary, she placed the crown on her offering.

Behold thy Mother. What is that Mother doing? "There stood by the Cross of Jesus, His Mother." Round about her are the jeering crowds hurling their taunts at her dying Son. Yet, Our Lady stood there as a priest might stand, underneath the Cross offering her Son as a Victim for sin. This was the culmination of her "fiat." Overwhelmed as she was with grief she did not wince. Sin had to be atoned for and Mary offered Christ. Such a Victim, offered by such hands, must surely find acceptance in God's sight. Even as the priest at Mass offers the Host and the Chalice in reparation, so did Mary stand there and offer the prayers and the wounds of her divine Son.

The taunts and blasphemies uttered on Calvary find a ringing echo in this twentieth century. As we write, the world is drenched in the blood of the most frightful war known to history. Europe is a slaughterhouse. How much sin must necessarily follow in the trail of this carnage? How much hatred, blasphemy, and immorality; how many thousands of lives lost; what destruction to property; what passions let loose. Even apart from the war, who can imagine the sins committed in a city like this in even one night? We are gathered around the Cross of the dying Christ. Make no mistake about it, before another sun rises over your town, Christ will be offended by crimes Saint Paul tells us should not be even mentioned amongst us. You know the world in which you live. You know the restless element that is abroad. You see for yourself the loosening of morals, the little regard for God's warnings, the break-up of home life, the heartlessness towards Christ's poor, and the neglect of prayer.

Do not tell me about crowded churches or zealous apostolates. Do not cite for me examples of generous self-sacrifice. For all that, we thank God and gratefully acknowledge that it is so. However, what is to be said about those who do not crowd our Churches? What of those who crowd our movie theaters and nightclubs? What of those who crowd into taverns or crowd our roads at night? Speak about the activities of our splendid Catholics if you will, but do not forget that Satan, too, has his agents. Do not fail to remember those whose lives are pampered, lazy, and selfish. If you think they are few, you do not know the force of the jeers uttered on Calvary that is finding an echo in our midst today.

Many Catholics seem to be under the impression that the service of Jesus Christ is only a negative thing. It seems to them, if they keep from sin and its occasions and if they ultimately escape hell, that is all that should be expected from them. Of course, it is of primary importance to do that much, and the words of Our Lord have so far impressed upon us the absolute need to break forever with sin and all that leads to sin. Now comes the positive lesson. Now comes the answer to that dynamic question that has revolutionized so many lives: What are you going to do for Christ?

What? Christ answers by telling you to look at His Mother. “Behold thy Mother.” On Calvary, she offered Him as a Victim for sin. That offering made adequate reparation for the sins of all time. It was infinite in value and, as a result of it, the “unsearchable riches of Christ” were stored up on Calvary. The soul may draw near and draw off from these fountains of the Savior.

What of the crimes of the present days? Our Lord can no longer suffer in His human Body for the sins that are being hurled against His Father today. However, He can suffer in His mystical Body, which is composed of the members of His Church.

That is the positive side of the spiritual life. That is Saint Paul’s sublime concept when he writes, “I fill up in my flesh those things that are wanting to the sufferings of Christ.” It was not enough merely to avoid sin and escape hell. He wanted to do something positive to prove his burning love for Christ, “Who loved me and delivered Himself for me.”

On Calvary, they mocked Him as they are mocking Him today. In reparation for sin, Mary stood on Calvary, offering Him on the Cross. Mary still stands waiting for victims who will go on the Cross willingly and allow her to offer them, as part of Christ’s mystical Body, in reparation for the heinous crimes that surround us today. It is a sublime vocation. It is to reproduce the victimhood of Christ in our sinful flesh. On Calvary, Mary’s first Victim prayed and suffered. He who would present himself to her in place of her Son must prepare, too, for a life of prayer and suffering. By such means, Christ expiated sin on Calvary. By these, it must be expiated today. Who is willing to come to Mary and say to her, “Behold thy son?”

FOURTH STATEMENT

MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?

It seems likely that this word of the dying Christ was uttered after that strange darkness had covered the earth. For the greater part of three hours, our Savior hung there in a state of torture that baffles our powers of imagination to envision. Then the darkness descended upon Him and accentuated His feeling of complete isolation and loneliness. It

is worthy to note that, at such an hour of loneliness, His remedy was prayer. The pathetic cry broke out over the hill of Calvary and sent its echo into the darkness: “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

It is easy to pray when consolations abound. Often, at the outset of the spiritual life, the soul is inundated with a heavenly joy. Everything seems so simple, sanctity is so reasonable, the Cross is so loved. It is difficult to understand why all men do not see and understand the love of Christ for them and why they do not make Him a fitting return. When the soul is in this state of sweetness and thus appreciates the supernatural value, there is nothing more natural than that she should find her chief delight in prayer.

If she perseveres, a change will probably come to her. Eventually, the sweetness will begin to evaporate. Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “I gave you milk to drink, not meat, because you were not able as yet.” In the beginning of the soul’s journey on the road of prayer and towards God, God generally allures her to love of divine things by giving her “milk” of sensible sweetness. As she progresses, He will offer her the meat of the strong. He will withdraw from her all taste and delight in the things of the spiritual life, and, like Jesus on Calvary, she will be inclined to complain and cry out, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

Has He actually forsaken her? Not at all. Prayer does not consist of sweetness but in converse with God. Before a soul may enter into “holy familiarity with God,” she must be purified. At first, she is attached, although she does not know it, to the sweetness. She believes she wants it only so it can help her move towards God, but, in reality, she is loving not so much God as the sweetness God is giving her. To train her to rise above this feeling, God takes it away when she has grown somewhat in spiritual strength.

How will the soul react? It is of paramount importance at a time like this, that she clearly understands her policy must be to make no change whatsoever in her spiritual life or in her resolutions. Let her turn back to creatures now—to the world, to comfort in gossip, movies, or night clubs—to any of the thousand things that are obstructions to her progress, though they are not sins. Let her at a time of trial like this go back to the good things the world has to offer her, and she may ruin a life of holiness. Much depends on her fidelity in this period of dryness. Jesus prayed in the darkness. Let her do the same and she will advance more in the love of God and in solid spirituality at a time like this than when she is abounding in sweetness.

More than this. If she will but hold on, the sweetness will return, as soon as the Lord sees that she has been purified. However, it will not be the same. It will be deeper, more soul satisfying, because now, because of her greater purity, she can draw nearer to the source of all purity. Hence, her prayer after this period of apparent dereliction has gone through a cleansing process. She seeks only God now, whereas before she sought His gifts.

It would be very easy to illustrate this from the lives of the saints. They became saints through the Cross and the form the Cross most often took was simply the dereliction of Calvary. Long periods of utter dryness, during which it would have been so simple to let go their hold upon the spiritual life, were crowned by a triumph similar to that which shone out after the tragedy of Calvary had been consummated.

It is not sweetness in prayer that makes saints, but adhering the will to God. The most searching test of this loyalty of the will is given when darkness covers the face of God. Calvary taught the saints to pray at such a time with all the greater earnestness and, because they learned that hard lesson, they rejoiced later in a fuller possession of God.

FIFTH STATEMENT

I THIRST.

When Our Lord was kneeling in Gethsemani, He prayed that the chalice might pass from Him. It was indeed a bitter chalice. The evangelists tell us there were three ingredients in that chalice.

“He began to be afraid.”

“He began to be weary” (or filled with loathing and disgust).

“He began to be sorrowful and to be sad.”

Fear, disgust, and sadness were thus the contents of His chalice. Fear filled His Heart because of the near approach of His sufferings. Disgust seized upon His immaculate soul because of that slimy specter that issued from the shadows, whose name is sin. Moreover, sadness crushed Him to earth because, in spite of all He was about to suffer, souls would be lost.

Still, He took the chalice although He had to force Himself. Then, on Calvary, He declared that He thirst. It seems as if the dying Savior thus expressed His willingness and His eagerness to drink even more deeply still of that bitter chalice that He found so hard to accept at first. In Gethsemani, He prayed asking His Father to remove the chalice. On Calvary, He told the Father He wanted more. Not only did He drink the chalice, but also, if the Father willed, He would drink more deeply by suffering more.

It is God’s way to never allow Himself to be outdone in generosity. It is beyond question that closely following Our Lord will include acceptance of difficult things. This condition, He will not tone down. “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his Cross daily, and follow Me.” Many hear this and pass Him by. It is a hard saying, and they cannot bring themselves to believe that His fellowship is worth it.

Others stop to listen. They hear Him invite them to a life of sacrifice and, little by little, perhaps at the cost of many a stiff battle within themselves, they come ultimately to a state when they live a life of habitual sacrifice. As they draw nearer towards this happy consummation, they make a discovery that surprises them. It is that—the more they “go in” for sacrifice, the happier they become. Just as Our Lord experienced a thirst for even greater sufferings, did the Father so will, so too they discover that the Cross and suffering, lovingly accepted, so far from embittering their lives and making them unhappy, prove rather to be the highroad to an intense gladness of heart that they never experienced before this. It is Our Lord’s generosity. The moment they give up anything for love of Him, He rewards them with a wonderful sense of freedom. A chain snaps. They feel they are emancipated from a tyranny that was holding them captive. When they broke the chain, they entered at once into the freedom of the children of God.

Our Lord refused the vinegar and gall that would have robbed Him of this precious suffering. Therefore, the soul that has discovered the joy of sacrifice, so far from wanting relaxation, regards suffering as her greatest gain for it affords her an opportunity to prove her love for Christ. It also affords Him an excuse to pour into the soul a joy not of this earth. This sublime folly was learned at the feet of Christ on Calvary.

When Saint Francis Xavier knelt in prayer at the close of an exhausting day of toil in his missions, he was heard to cry out, “Lord, withdraw these consolations from me and give me the Cross and suffering.” When Our Lord asked Saint John of the Cross what reward he wanted for all he had done in God’s service, he answered, “Only to be despised and to suffer for Thee!” This is, if you like, “unnatural.” Better, it is supernatural. Grace can effect marvels on nature when given an opportunity. Let the soul, like Christ in Gethsemani, steel herself to grasp the chalice and drink it. When she has drunk, she will still cry out, again like Him: I thirst. You might suffer still more, seeing that suffering opens the way to such intimacy with Christ.

SIXTH STATEMENT

IT IS CONSUMMATED.

This was spoken just before Our Lord died. After He had uttered it, Jesus, bowing down His head, gave up the ghost. Hence, the most natural interpretation to give to His statement is that it refers to His life, which has now at last come to a close. That life was a perfect life. He lived it in the manner most surely calculated to give the maximum of glory to His eternal Father. Man’s task, too, is to give glory to God by his life, and, since this was done in the most perfect way by Our Lord, it follows that the more closely man reproduces Christ’s life in his own, the more perfectly he too will glorify God.

That is the teaching of the saints, and notably of Saint Paul. The great apostle never wearies of impressing upon us that Christ is the Model we have to reproduce in ourselves.

A few texts that come instinctively to mind to illustrate the central idea of Pauline theology—that a Christian must reproduce Christ's life in himself—including:

“My little children for whom I am in labor again until Christ is fashioned in you.”

“Be ye imitators of me as I am of Christ.”

“Always bearing about in our bodies the mortification of Jesus.”

The Life that ended on Calvary had two phases. The first phase (the suffering) was “consummated” on Calvary. When the suffering ended, the second phase began. The clouds parted, the sun shone through, and Jesus entered heaven in triumph to begin the second phase of His life, a phase that will continue through the endless ages of eternity.

At present, they who belong to Christ are reproducing the first part of his life. That is why there is nothing more reasonable than to expect treatment in this world similar to what He experienced.

“Wonder not, brethren, if the world hateth you.” “You are not of the world as I also am not of the world. If you had been of the world, the world would love its own. But because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.”

That is the first part for the Christian. Hence, while he is here, he looks out for hardship and suffering and contradiction and poverty. It seems to him the most natural thing in the world to have these things, for it is by these that he is to be fashioned according to the Model. “Suffering,” writes Saint John of the Cross, “is the badge of those who love.”

The glorious phase, too, will be reproduced for us. When the soul has followed Him faithfully throughout the shame and humiliations of Calvary, the clouds will part and there will be a wonderful welcome home. “Well done, good and faithful servant”! The glorious phase now will begin in that soul. For Jesus Christ, the glorious phase will continue through eternity. The same will now be the soul's share in the glorious phase of the life of the Model in proportion to the fidelity with which it was fashioned by the way of suffering and humiliation.

“It is consummated” can refer, too, to the love of Jesus Christ for a soul. Sometimes while we follow Him to Calvary, we feel footsore and weary and almost ready to think that all religion is make believe. However, at a time like that, if we kneel down immediately, we are cheered and encouraged. Why? Because Jesus Christ on Calvary did all an omnipotent love can do to prove itself. As He looks down into the soul at His feet, He sees all its most secret sins—all the broken resolutions, all those others it has led

into sin, all the sacrilegious Communion, the impurities, the drunkenness. Such a terrible catalogue of vice! Yet, knowing all about that poor soul and her evil ways, He tells her that His Heart loves still, and still is ready to forgive.

He cannot do more than He did on Calvary to assure the repentant sinner that, even if her sins are red as scarlet, He is anxious to make them white as snow. This is the “consummation” of His love. If Calvary fails to convince you that He is ready to forgive, then omnipotent love can do no more. He is a true friend and he fulfills that grand definition of a friend, “a man who knows everything about you yet loves you just the same.”

SEVENTH STATEMENT

INTO THY HANDS, O LORD, I COMMEND MY SPIRIT.

Death is a penalty and it is useless for us to try to rob it of its terrors. Try as we may, the fearful issues that are in the balance at that moment fill us with dread. If you are at death what you ought to be, then your eternal destiny is secure. If at death you are found wanting, your life, whatever it may have been in the eyes of men, is now proved to be an utter failure. “What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?” Or, what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

At the death of Christ, we must be impressed by the confident assurance with which He passed out of this world. Not long before this, He cried to His Father as if in despair, but that all passed away and He spoke with confidence and with peace. “Into Thy Hands, O Lord, I commend My spirit.”

Our Lord’s confidence is accounted for when we recall the inviolable fidelity with which He did the Father’s Will. That Will was the rule of His life. “The things that are pleasing to My Father I always do.” Hence, when He looked back from Calvary over those thirty-three years, He could see clearly that in everything He did or left undone, in all that He said or did not say, in His journeys or in retirement—throughout all—only one guide determined His actions,—the Will of His Eternal Father. Well, therefore, might He sum up His life by saying, “Father, I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do, and now I come to Thee.” There was no anxiety. There was only the confident assurance that all was well, for the dutiful Son did exactly what the Father sent Him into the world to do. Hence, His dying words were a shout of victory, for to serve God is to reign.

Can death be robbed of its terrors? Many friends of God have gone to meet death with a smile of joy on their faces. What is the explanation of their confidence? It is built on the same assurance that accounts for the confidence of Christ. Like Him, the faithful servant has done God’s Will, though not indeed with the same exactness. There have been

failures, many of them perhaps, but at least the desire and the effort have been kept up and the trustful soul knows in Whom she trusts. Little does it matter to her on her deathbed that she has been popular, or much travelled, that she has had a “good time,” that she lived in one place or another—all that simply ceases to matter. Only one fact will comfort her, only one thought will sustain her—that she can lift up her eyes until they meet the eyes of Christ and can say, like Him, that she has tried consistently to do God’s Will in her special state of life. With this assurance, she can indeed face death calmly and repeat with her great Model: Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

We are living in an age that should be prolific in saints. We are crippled at present with mediocrity in the spiritual life and we are paralyzed by ordinariness. In view of the sin that is rife, it is time we realize the need for reparation. The Sacred Heart appeals for it and reparation is to be made by modeling ourselves on Him. This means sanctity, not the mere avoidance of sin or merely escaping hell. It means generosity, the determination to offend the whole world and risk every material gain, rather than swerve a hairs-breadth from what we know to be God’s Will.

In the proportion that we do God’s Will (even the Will of His good pleasure which we can disobey without actually committing sin), Christ’s grace will flow from Calvary into our souls. In the proportion that the grace of Christ flows into our souls, we become modeled upon Christ. These are the three steps on the road to sanctity—do God’s Will and grace will flow unimpeded into the soul; let grace flow thus into the soul and the soul will grow in Christliness; and Christliness is another name for sanctity.

Christ appeals for saints. What bitter regret we shall have at our death if we have turned a deaf ear to the appeal! What sorrow that we are only good enough when He was urging us all those years to generosity! Yet, what confidence if we have consistently, tried in spite of many falls, to keep our eyes fixed on the Model and to do God’s Will! Such perseverance will entitle us to look forward to the crown, to mingle our confident prayer with the prayer of the dying Christ, “Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.”

Nihil Obstat:

CAROLUS DOYLE, S.J.

Censor Theol. Deput.

Imprimi Potest:

✠ FRANCISCUS J. WALL

Vic. Cap.

Dublin, 29 Juni 1940



This e-book was produced by:

The Seraphim Company, Inc.

**8528 Kenosha Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80908-5000**

www.servi.org